

# Pizza Power

Examine the trends, and grab a piece of the pie.

By Jody Shee

Perhaps no other entrée has inspired such innovation, competition and consumer desire as the pizza pie.

Pizza restaurants rake in \$37 billion annually, with nearly half of that reaped by the top four pizza chains (Pizza Hut, Domino's, Papa John's and Little Caesars). Pizza makes up more than 10% of all foodservice sales.

Subway's 8-inch personal pizza begins with par-baked crust, sauce and cheese. After a customer adds other ingredients, the pizza is cooked in a convection toaster oven for 80 seconds.

While the numbers favor the big chains, innovation and trends shine in independent establishments and small chains.

Pizza experts note several trends leading the gourmet pizza movement: a return to traditional pizza, a desire for healthy and organic options and a keenness for creative flavor combinations.

Competition always breeds innovation, and that's certainly true with pizza. "If there's no 'wow' in your pizza, you're on thin ice," says pizza guru Dave Ostrander, otherwise known as Big Dave. He

owned a pizzeria for 25 years, and now serves as a pizza-operations consultant, speaker and trainer, based in Oscoda, Mich.

On the chain level, California Pizza Kitchen in Los Angeles reinvented pizza 20 years ago when it came out with such unique versions as barbecue chicken, tandoori and Thai pizzas, Ostrander says. "They went out on the edge and made people talk."

But before California Pizza Kitchen there was Wolfgang Puck—the first to take pizza outside the box, Ostrander says. Puck's first signature dish at Spago on West Hollywood's Sunset Strip back in the 1980s was a gourmet pizza topped with smoked salmon and caviar.

## Back to its roots

While Puck was making a name for himself with pizza, Ted Rowe, chef/owner of Mulberry Street Pizzeria in San Rafael, Calif., also was doing unique things with traditional and nontraditional pizza toppings.

He looks at the distance gourmet pizza has gone, and notes, "There's



a trend now of pulling back to more traditional pies." One Italian favorite is Florence pizza with prosciutto di Parma, a few mushrooms, artichoke hearts and provolone cheese on a standard crust, he says.

Tony Gemignani, cooking instructor, author, consultant, president of World Pizza Champions Inc. and co-owner of Pyzano's Pizzeria, Castro Valley, Calif., also notices a back-to-the-basics trend, especially with Neapolitan-style pizza, for which cooks and restaurants can be certified by an association founded in Naples, Italy.

The association's written guidelines uphold the authenticity of the famed Neapolitan pizza with its size, ingredient and dough requirements. The dough must be made with 00 flour, be hand-kneaded and shaped (no mechanical equipment allowed), and be baked in a wood-fired oven. Just

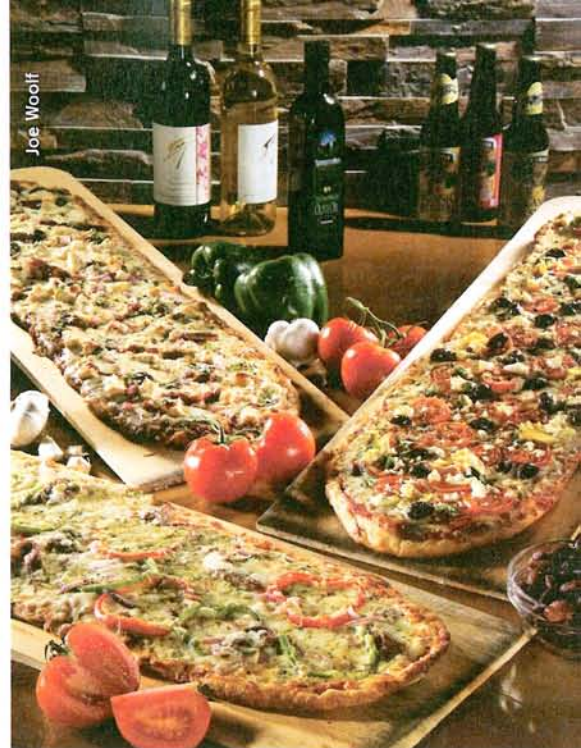
one tomato variety will do—DOP (protected designation of origin) San Marzano tomatoes. "That style is like the godfather of pizza, and it's recreating itself in the U.S. now," Gemignani says.

### Back to nature

Swelling consumer and operator intrigue with all things healthy, organic and sustainable also is making inroads into the pizza business.

You see more whole-wheat and gluten-free crusts, Gemignani says, while he notes that pizza is universal when it comes to health. "It's one of few foods where you can get all food groups in one item. And tomatoes are hot when it comes to pizza, for the lycopene in pizza sauce," he says.

When the low-carb craze was in full swing a few years ago, Rowe began offering paper



Eco-friendly Pizza Fusion's organic pizzas are shaped like skateboards, and customers can choose a multigrain crust, or a pie made with gluten-free dough.

pizza, and marketed it that way. A pizza pan is lined with parchment paper and sauce, and cheese and toppings are heaped on before baking. The cheese holds it all together, and guests eat it with a knife and fork. "All the great flavors are there, and if it has lots of vegetables, you don't miss the

## Make it snappy

Minus the gourmet factor, a new fast-food trend is powered by up-to-date equipment and the desire to offer customers more options. Watch as more non-pizza chains offer made-to-order pizza that's crisp and ready in seconds.

Subway, based in Milford, Conn., with 20,000 U.S. locations, had its eye on pizza for years, says public relations coordinator Les Winograd. It wasn't until the chain upgraded its equipment with convection toaster ovens two years ago that it could add the coveted pizza to the lineup. After

successful test marketing, franchisees now have the option to offer guests 8-inch personal pizzas, which come to the stores par-baked and layered with sauce and cheese. Guests can order additional ingredients, and watch while the pizza runs through the toaster oven in 80 seconds.

In a mere 25 seconds, guests at the quick-serve Mexican restaurant chain Salsarita's Fresh Cantina, with headquarters in Charlotte, N.C., can watch a loaded tortilla become a crisp pizza. The 70-store chain introduced four pizzas to its menu

the first quarter of this year, and the category already makes up 5% to 7% of entrée sales, says chief operating officer Charles Ratterree. The "crust" is a 10-inch flour tortilla, and TurboChef's Tornado speed-cook oven makes the crisp pizza possible. For a starting point, guests can order taco, BBQ chicken, white or veggie pizza, though they are all customizable, as the tortilla goes through a made-to-order assembly line before it hits the oven.

crust," Rowe says. Though not as popular since the low-carb phase waned, he notes it's still available, and provides an alternative for guests who are gluten intolerant.

Two years ago there came a new pizza kid on the block, with the goal to make pies using local and organic ingredients on Neapolitan-style pizzas with 100% organic white or wheat crusts. With three locations, Stone Hearth Pizza Co., Belmont, Mass., gets its cheese from local cheesemakers and its produce directly from farms, avoiding middlemen, says general manager and executive chef Michael Ehlenfeldt. "I think we've managed to prove that buying this way makes more sense, and it can be sustainable from a financial point of view, as well." The company plans to expand to up to 24 stores in the next four or five years.

Meanwhile, another up-and-comer entered the pizza market, touting an all-natural and organic menu with an eco-friendly business model. Pizza Fusion in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., opened its first two restaurants in February 2006 with an eye to franchising nationally.

It was only natural for co-owner Vaughan Lazar to make it an organic concept. As a consumer, "There was nowhere I could go and eat organically unless I set up camp at Whole Foods," he says. "Pizza is everyone's favorite food, and it's considerably easier to operate an organic pizza place than any other restaurant concept."

But the goal he shares with his partner reaches further than offering an organic meal quickly. "We want to change the way people do business, and set an example that way," Lazar says. Therefore, the company purchases renewable-energy certificates to support wind power. "We give money to the wind farm, and they supply wind to the power grid. It replaces energy that may come from nuclear or coal power plants. If more people did that, eventually we'd phase out the need for other power."

### Forward thinking

While authenticity and wholesomeness create the wave for some pizza places,

others set the pizza bar with unique ingredients, shapes and baking methods.

For the "wow" factor, Pizza Fusion shapes its pizza like a skateboard—9 inches by 28 inches. It bakes the thin-crust pie in a Roto-Flex oven. Guests also can choose a multigrain crust or a pie made with gluten-free dough, Lazar says.

In April, Pizza Fusion introduced surf-and-turf pizza, which already has become popular. It combines organic New York strip steak with Grade A Maine lobster meat and wild-caught Key West shrimp.

Mission di Parma pizza was a prizewinning pie for Doug Ferriman, owner of Crazy Dough's Pizza Company in Boston. The pizza combines dried figs with fig jam for sweetness and prosciutto di Parma for saltiness. Ferriman rounds out the flavor with blue cheese and mozzarella. The pizza won him first place in the 2007 Pizza of the Year contest at Pizza Festiva XV in Las Vegas, sponsored by the California Milk Advisory Board and *Pizza Today*.

Ferriman says he believes his pizza won for the hickory-wood grill flavor from baking the crust over a char broiler with seasoned briquettes. He first grills the dough, then adds the ingredients and finishes it off in the oven.

Stone Hearth Pizza Co.'s Farm Fresh Pizza is made with roasted cherry tomatoes, charred red and yellow peppers, garlic oil, Maple Brook Farms mozzarella, potatoes, artichoke hearts and green and black olives and topped with an arugula, red onion and prosciutto salad.



Heath Robbins

In the old days, pizza sauce was always red. "Nowadays, the sauce might be barbecue, like on a barbecue-chicken pizza. Or it might be hoisin sauce for Chinese pizza. Or there might be a garlic-and-olive-oil-infused glaze on the crust," says consultant Ostrander. To draw children, some pizzas use ranch dressing as a sauce, with mild toppings.

One of the pies at Stone Hearth Pizza uses a sauce of puréed white beans, which is topped with sautéed red onions and fresh mozzarella. "When it comes out, it gets a small salad of baby spinach on top dressed with pesto, and on top of that, shaved red onion," Ehlenfeldt says.

Still, red sauce rules, but not all red sauces are created equal. "The best pizza sauce is made with fresh-pack tomatoes," Ostrander says. Fresh-pack tomato sauce goes through only one stage in the manufacturing process versus sauce packed from concentrate, which goes through two stages in manufacturing and loses some natural flavor, he adds. Though it costs a bit more, it's worth it. "The difference between an average pizza and a great one is 50 to 60 cents," he says.

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Salsarita's Fresh Cantina

Salsarita's Fresh Cantina veggie pizza—along with taco, BBQ chicken and white varieties—has a flour tortilla "crust" and cooks in 25 seconds.



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